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KEVIN STUART AMONG MONGOLIAN ENGLISH-LEARNERS IN HUHHOT DURING THE MID-1980S

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In the mid-1980s, Southern Mongolia (Inner Mongolia) was still at the early stage of opening its door to Westerners. In Huhhot, the capital of Southern Mongolia, there were only a handful of Westerners visiting, teaching English, or studying at the various colleges, and only for limited periods of time. In fact, foreigners were so few and cherished that they were often invited by the governor of Southern Mongolia to attend such state events as the annual Tsagaan Sar 'Lunar New Year' Celebration. The appearance of foreigners at these auspicious events was interpreted as a symbol of how the government was making an effort to introduce foreign investments and ideas to the economic and political reforms. Kevin was one of the respected foreigners working in Huhhot at that time.

Kevin taught English at Inner Mongolia University and Inner Mongolia Normal University for a total of three years in the 1980s. During that time, the 'English Corner', a place where English learners could practice the language by talking to each other, was a novel concept. Such events were held sporadically, and were organized by volunteer English teachers or senior English majors. Some of the few Mongolian students who were curious about learning English occasionally visited the English Corner. The best thing about the English Corner was that we had a chance to meet native English speakers and practice our English with them. We got acquainted with Kevin at the English Corner, and found that he was an enthusiastic supporter of Mongolian students learning English.

The admission of Mongolian students to colleges was limited at that time. Most were from rural areas in Southern Mongolia. At Southern Mongolia Normal University, some departments lacked programs that were taught in Mongolian, or only admitted Mongolian

students sporadically. As a result, Mongolian students faced significant challenges. Due to the lack of Mongolian-speaking instructors, Mongolian students often had to take courses exclusively in the Chinese language. All Mongolian students, except for those who were majoring in Mongolian, had to learn another language, Chinese, to catch up with the majority of students, who were of Chinese descent. Mongolian students had never been exposed to English, while the Chinese students had started learning English in middle school.

The universities encouraged Mongolian students to learn English, and opened beginner classes, but the textbooks were in Chinese, and the teachers were Chinese. Most Mongolian students struggled to learn Chinese sufficiently well to cope with their regular programs. There was an enormous gap between the Chinese and Mongolian students in terms of their level of English knowledge. Among the few Mongolian students who were taking English classes, many stopped learning after completing only one year of study. As a consequence, English was simply inaccessible to Mongol students in Southern Mongolia.

At the English Corners, Kevin was a passionate advocate of Mongolian students' involvement. He noticed the natural language ability of some students, and believed that every Mongolian student was potentially a fluent English speaker. He encouraged students to overcome the hurdle of low self-confidence, and taught students how to improve their spoken English. On some weekends, he even invited us to his residence, and let students practice their English in casual settings over tea or beer. A number of us advanced our English so fast that Kevin asked us to write some essays and articles about Mongolian culture, language, and education. Each of us wrote several articles with Kevin's help. With his guidance and editorial help, we published several articles (see the Bibliography below). In addition, he also helped us publish peer-reviewed scientific articles in our respective fields, which helped us start our careers. These achievements would have been nearly impossible, if not for his guidance.

Kevin was the first to realize the difficulty of learning English for the Mongolian students in Southern Mongolia, and the need for

specialized outreach. He worked with several English teachers to translate an English textbook from Chinese to Mongolian, and produced a full set of TV and radio programs that were broadcast across the region. The programs are still the only broadcasts of their kind available in the region and are still used today. Mongolian English learners know Kevin through this program and benefit greatly from his tireless efforts.

We are happy to share in the celebration of Kevin's sixtieth birthday, and wish to honor his contribution to many Mongolian scholars' success, teaching, and inspiration. Through him, we started to learn about the Western world and envisioned Mongolians in Southern Mongolia as proficient in English. Far more than that, he helped us to look at Southern Mongolia from a whole new perspective that otherwise was incomprehensible to us. Kevin's friendship with Mongolians and his generous help touched many Mongolian scholars during his three-year career in Southern Mongolia. We have the utmost respect for his teaching and friendship, and we wish him more success in his continuing adventures and endeavors around the world.

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